


Replay: First Lady's Remarks on Women and Girls

Most times, a speech suits the time, place and audience for which it was intended. But sometimes, a speech transcends that time, space and audience. First lady Michelle Obama's speech at the 2014 summit of the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders is one of those speeches. With honesty and vigor, she addressed the need to change attitudes and beliefs about women and girls. Here are some of her remarks.

[...]

Today, I want us to talk — and I mean really talk. I want to speak as openly and honestly as possible about the issues we care about and what it means to be a leader, not just in Africa but in the world today.

First lady Michelle Obama speaks to  participants of the Presidential Summit for the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders in Washington on July 30, 2014.

Now, one of the issues that I care deeply about is [...] girls' education. And across the globe, the statistics on this issue are heartbreaking. Right now, 62 million girls worldwide are not in school, including nearly 30 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa. And as we saw in Pakistan, where Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen, and in Nigeria where more than 200 girls were kidnapped from their school dormitory by Boko Haram terrorists, even when girls do attend school, they often do so at great risk.

And as my husband said earlier this week, we know that when girls aren't educated, that doesn't just limit their prospects, leaving them more vulnerable to poverty, violence and disease, it limits the prospects of their families and their countries as well.

Now, in recent years, there's been a lot of talk about how to address this issue, and how we need more schools and teachers, more money for toilets and uniforms, transportation, school fees. And of course, all of these issues are critically important, and I could give a perfectly fine speech today about increasing investments in girls' education around the world.

But I said I wanted to be honest. And if I do that, we all know that the problem here isn't only about resources, it's also about attitudes and beliefs. It's about whether fathers and mothers think their daughters are as worthy of an education as their sons. It's about whether societies cling to outdated laws and traditions that oppress and exclude women, or whether they view women as full citizens entitled to fundamental rights.

So the truth is, I don't think it's really productive to talk about issues like girls' education unless we're willing to have a much bigger, bolder conversation about how women are viewed and treated in the world today. And we need to be having this conversation on every continent and in every

country on this planet. And that's what I want to do today with all of you, because so many of you are already leading the charge for progress in Africa.

Now, as an African-American woman, this conversation is deeply personal to me. The roots of my family tree are in Africa. As you know, my husband's father was born and raised in Kenya — and members of our extended family still live there. I have had the pleasure of traveling to Africa a number of times over the years, including four trips as first lady, and I have brought my mother and my daughters along with me whenever I can. So believe me, the blood of Africa runs through my veins, and I care deeply about Africa's future.

Now, the status of women in Africa is also personal to me as a woman. See, what I want you all to understand is that I am who I am today because of the people in my family — particularly the men in my family — who valued me and invested in me from the day I was born. I had a father, a brother, uncles, grandfathers who encouraged me and challenged me, protected me, and told me that I was smart and strong and beautiful.

And as I grew up, the men who raised me set a high bar for the type of men I'd allow into my life — which is why I went on to marry a man who had the good sense to fall in love with a woman who was his equal — and to treat me as such. A man who supports and reveres me, and who supports and reveres our daughters as well.

And throughout my life — understand this — every opportunity I've had, every achievement I'm proud of has stemmed from this solid foundation of love and respect. So given these experiences, it saddens and confuses me to see that too often, women in some parts of Africa are still denied the rights and opportunities they deserve to realize their potential.


Now, let's be very clear: In many countries in Africa, women have made tremendous strides. More girls are attending school. More women are starting businesses. Maternal mortality has plummeted. And more women are serving in parliaments than ever before. In fact, in some countries, more than 30 percent of legislators are women. In Rwanda, it's over 50 percent — which, by the way, is more than double the percentage of women in the U.S. Congress.

Now, these achievements represent remarkable progress. But at the same time, when girls in some places are still being married off as children, sometimes before they even reach puberty; when female genital mutilation still continues in some countries; when human trafficking, rape and domestic abuse are still too common, and perpetrators are often facing no consequences for their crimes — then we still have some serious work to do in Africa and across the globe.

And while I have great respect for cultural differences, I think we can all agree that practices like genital cutting, forced child marriage, domestic violence are not legitimate cultural practices, they are serious human rights violations and have no place in any country on this Earth. These practices have no place in our shared future, because we all know that our future lies in our people — in their talent, their ambition, their drive. And no country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contributions of half of its citizens.

And I know this firsthand from the history of my own country. A century ago, women in America weren't allowed to vote. Decades ago, it was perfectly legal for employers to refuse to hire women. Domestic violence was viewed not as a crime, but as a private family matter between a man and his

wife.

First lady Michelle Obama hugs a  participant of the Presidential Summit for the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders in Washington on July 30, 2014.

But in each generation, people of conscience stood up and rejected these unjust practices. They chained themselves to the White House gates, waged hunger strikes in prison to win the right to vote. They took their bosses to court. They spoke out about rape and fought to prosecute rapists, despite the stigma and shame. They left their abusive husbands, even when that meant winding up on the streets with their children.

And today in America, we see the results of those hard-fought battles: 60 percent of college students today are women. Women are now more than half the workforce. And in recent decades, women's employment has added nearly \$2 trillion to the U.S. economy — yes, trillion.

Now, are we anywhere near full economic, political, and domestic equality in the United States? Absolutely not. We still struggle every day with serious issues like violence against women, unequal pay. Women are still woefully underrepresented in our government and in the senior ranks of our corporations.

But slowly, generation after generation, we've been moving in the right direction because of brave individuals who were willing to risk their jobs, their reputations, and even their lives to achieve equality. And it wasn't just brave women who made these sacrifices. It was also brave men, too — men who hired women, men who passed laws to empower women, men who prosecuted other men who abused women.

So to all the men, my brothers here today, I have a simple message: We need you to shake things up. Too often, women are fighting these battles alone, but men like you, progressive men who are already ahead of the curve on women's issues, you all are critically important to solving this problem.

And that starts by doing a little introspection. And I say this not just to the 250 of you who are in the room today, but to men around the world. Men in every country need to look into their hearts and souls and ask themselves whether they truly view and treat women as their equals. And then when you all encounter men in your lives who answer no to that question, then you need to take them to task. You need to tell them that any man who uses his strength to oppress women is a coward, and he is holding back the progress of his family and his country.

Tell them that a truly strong, powerful man isn't threatened by a strong, powerful woman. Instead, he is challenged by her, he is inspired by her, he is pleased to relate to her as an equal. And I want you to keep modeling that behavior yourselves by promoting women in your companies, passing laws to empower women in your countries, and holding the same ambitious dreams for your daughters as you do for your sons.

And to the women here, my sisters [...] I want us as women to understand that oppression is not a one-way street.

See, too often, without even realizing it, we as women internalize the oppression we face in our societies by believing harmful messages about how we should look and act, particularly as women of color — messages that tell us that we're ugly or irrelevant, that we don't deserve full control over our bodies, that we should keep our mouths shut and just do as we're told. And then, too often, we turn around and impose those same beliefs on other women and girls in our lives, including our own daughters.

For example, in countries across the globe, there are women who still support and carry out the practice of genital cutting. There are women who are still insisting on marrying off their young daughters or keeping them home from school to help with the housework.

And then there are the more subtle harms that we afflict — inflict on each other — the harm of spurning our sisters who don't conform to traditions because we're jealous or suspicious of their courage and their freedom; the harm of turning a blind eye when a woman in our community is being abused because we don't want to cause conflict with our neighbors by speaking up.

And I imagine that for some of you here today, getting your degree might have meant disobeying or disappointing your families. Maybe while you've been acing your studies and thriving in your career, you have a grandmother who has been wringing her hands because you're not yet married.

But, my sisters, you all are here today because you have found a way to overcome these challenges, and you have blossomed into powerful, accomplished women. And we need you all to help others do the same.


All of us, men and women on every continent, we all need to identify these problems in ourselves and in our communities, and then commit to solving them. And I say this to you not just as lawyers and activists and business leaders, but as current and future parents. Because as a mother myself, I can tell you that this is where change truly happens. With the behavior we model, with our actions and inactions, every day, we as parents shape the values of the next generation.

For example, my parents never had the chance to attend university, but they had the courage and foresight to push me to get the best education I could. And they weren't threatened by the prospect of me having more opportunities than they had — just the opposite. They were thrilled.

And that's what should drive us all: the hope of raising the next generation to be stronger, smarter and bolder than our generation. And that is exactly the kind of work that so many of you are already doing in your families and your communities, which is why I'm so proud of you.

[...]

This is where Africa's future lies — with those women-run businesses, with those girls attending university, and with leaders like you who are making those dreams possible. And the question today is how all of you and young people like you will steer Africa's course to embrace that future.

First lady Michelle Obama speaks to 

selected participants of the Presidential Summit for the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders in Washington on July 30, 2014, during a roundtable discussion.

Because ultimately, that's what leadership is really about. It's not just about holding degrees or holding elected office. And it's not about preserving our own power or continuing traditions that oppress and exclude.

Leadership is about creating new traditions that honor the dignity and humanity of every individual. Leadership is about empowering all of our people — men, women, boys and girls — to fulfill every last bit of their God-given potential. And when we commit to that kind of leadership across the globe, that is when we truly start making progress on girls' education. Because that's when families in small villages around the world will demand equal opportunities for their daughters. They won't wait. That's when countries will willingly and generously invest in sending their girls to school, because they'll know how important it is.

And we all know the ripple effects we can have when we give our girls a chance to learn. We all know that girls who are educated earn higher wages. They're more likely to stand up to discrimination and abuse. They have healthier children who are more likely to attend school themselves.

So no matter where you all work, no matter what issue you focus on — whether it's health or microfinance, human rights or clean energy — women's equality must be a central part of your work. It must. Because make no mistake about it, the work of transforming attitudes about women, it now falls on your shoulders. And it's up to you all to embrace the future. [...]

And I know this won't be easy. I know that you will face all kinds of obstacles and resistance — you already have. But when you get tired or frustrated, when things seem hopeless and you start thinking about giving up, I want you to remember the words of the man whom your fellowship is now named — and I know these words have been spoken many times. As Madiba once said, "It always seems impossible until it is done." And I, oh, I know the truth of those words from my own history and from the history of my country.

My ancestors came here in chains. My parents and grandparents knew the sting of segregation and discrimination. Yet I attended some of the best universities in this country. I had career opportunities beyond my wildest dreams. And today, I live in the White House, a building — but we must remember, we live in a home that was constructed by slaves.

Today, I watch my daughters — two beautiful African-American girls — walking our dogs in the shadow of the Oval Office. And today, I have the privilege of serving and representing the United States of America across the globe.


So my story and the story of my country is the story of the impossible getting done. And I know that can be your story and that can be Africa's story too. But it will take new energy, it will take new ideas, new leadership from young people like you. That is why we brought you here today.

We've done this because we believe in Africa, and we believe in all of you. And understand we are

filled with so much hope and so many expectations for what you will achieve. You hold the future of your continent in your hands, and I cannot wait to see everything you will continue to accomplish in the years ahead.

Women and Girls: A Sound Investment

Some of you have asked, “Why should we focus on women and girls? Why shouldn’t we focus on empowering everyone — women and girls, men and boys?” It’s a good question. The answer is because a gap exists between the opportunities and resources available to men and boys and those available to women and girls.


For every year of secondary schooling a  girl receives, her earning power increases by 15-25 percent

According to the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) (USAID), 1 in 3 girls around the world will experience gender-based violence in their lifetimes, 1 in 5 girls in the developing world who enroll in primary school never finish, and 1 in 7 girls in the developing world are forced into marriage before their 15th birthdays.

A girl’s situation does not improve with age. According to the [World Health Organization](#), complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 globally. According to the [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO), women own just between 10 and 20 percent of the world’s land, despite making up more than 40 percent of its agricultural labor force. And according to [USAID](#), women-owned enterprises make up as little as 10 percent of all businesses in Africa.

Whether in the classroom, the hospital or the office, women and girls face challenges unique to their gender. The good news is that even a small investment in a woman or a girl can have a huge return.

When Women Succeed, Society Succeeds

Women make up nearly 64 percent of  Rwanda’s Chamber of Deputies and nearly 39 percent of Rwanda’s Senate. Many credit women’s political participation in Rwanda with helping the country recover from its civil war.


Investing in women and girls means taking actions — big and small — to bring about gender

equality. It means changing society's attitudes and behaviors toward women and girls. It means rethinking the roles and responsibilities of women and girls. It means creating a world where women and girls enjoy the same human rights and have access to the same opportunities as men and boys.

Investing in women and girls isn't just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. Here are some benefits investing in women and girls can have:

Stronger democracies. Women's participation in politics has tangible gains for democracy. According to USAID, countries where women hold at least 30 percent of political seats are more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic. Not only that, it also found that higher rates of women's political participation are associated with lower levels of government corruption.

Improved public service delivery. Including women in the political space has benefits for citizens, too, because women are more likely to invest in the public good than their male counterparts. In India, for example, USAID found that political districts with more female representatives enjoyed greater community benefits such as investments in drinking water facilities and roadways.

By including women in the peacekeeping  process, countries ensure more lasting and just outcomes following conflict.

Enhanced food security. The FAO estimates that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20-30 percent. That would be enough to feed an additional 150 million people.

More lasting peace. When women play a role in conflict situations, they become drivers of reconciliation and reconstruction. Evidence shows that including women in conflict-related decisionmaking and peace-building efforts can lead to more durable, comprehensive and widely accepted peace agreements.

Greater economic growth. According to USAID, when 10 percent more girls go to school, a country's GDP will grow on average by 3 percent. And a girl's individual earning power increases by 15-25 percent for every year of secondary schooling she receives.

These are just a few ways investing in women and girls enables a community, a country and a continent to flourish.


What's Next?

As Secretary Kerry said, "No country can succeed unless every citizen is empowered to contribute to its future. And no peace can endure if women are not afforded a central role."

So over the next month, commit to investing in women and girls. It can be something as simple as reading a book to your younger sister or as elaborate as hosting a series of financial literacy workshops for women in your community. The goal is to act and, through your actions, bring about a more equal, prosperous and secure world for everyone.

Think of the impact the YALI Network could make if all 130,000 of you act.

Enthusiasm Is a Starting Point for Better Health

Dr. Sandrine Talla is a general  practitioner in Cameroon. Courtesy of Dr. Sandrine Talla.

Individuals can make a big impact on the health of their communities by mobilizing groups to address specific issues. For example, if you believe that there should be more awareness of HIV/AIDS, you could organize a community health screening event. Dr. Sandrine Talla, a general practitioner and HIV/AIDS clinical manager at Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services, offers her advice to the YALI Network on how to mobilize community members and leaders around such events.

Question: What resources does one need to mobilize a community health screening?

Talla: I believe that the greatest resource to achieve anything in life is your enthusiasm and vision. After that, other things fall into place. These include:

- Human resources, that is, people who can serve as counselors and help perform the tests. A few volunteers with the same drive will do. HIV in Africa is still associated with a lot of stigma and a lot of misconceptions. People need to be properly counseled before and after they undergo an HIV screening test (this is called pre- and post-test counseling) and linked to care appropriately.
- Material resources, and that means posters for health education, screening test kits and other testing accessories. Sometimes, visual aids such as a computer, a projector or flip charts will help to enhance the presentation and improve audience understanding.
- Finally, you need financial resources for logistics.

Q: Tell the YALI Network more about the power of enthusiasm.

Talla: Enthusiasm helps you generate inner strength to move on even in the face of challenges. Enthusiasm is contagious. One's enthusiasm will provoke others to be interested in the work, and obstacles become steppingstones. This is what I meant by "other things falling in place." Some people may not support your vision, but with enough enthusiasm, you will be able to carry on.

Q: How do you win support from community leaders?

Talla: The first thing is to identify that there is a need for people to know their HIV status and to access medical care. Once this is done, it is always important to start with those around you, that is, friends and families who might support the work you are doing.

Then, identify the leaders of the community. Discussing these needs with the leaders first and engaging them in finding solutions will go a long way to stir up enthusiasm and support for your program.

My pastor at my local church first brought up the idea that I should educate church members about HIV/AIDS. Church leaders gave me a lot of encouragement and financial support that you need to run such activities.

We always do the disease screening free, not only for HIV, but also for some other diseases, such as hepatitis, diabetes and others. When the service is free, more people will get tested.

I intend to launch into neighboring churches when I am back home after my fellowship.

Q: HIV/AIDS is a serious international problem, but what actions can individuals take to help their communities?

Talla: An individual can do a lot in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic:

- Get involved in educating the community about the disease, starting with families and friends, with emphasis on mode of transmission, prevention and treatment. Nelson Mandela reminded us that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”
- Create a platform where myths and misconceptions about HIV can be corrected. Misconceptions around HIV/AIDS remain, especially in Africa. They prevent people from getting tested or even seeking care.
- Encourage parents to start sex education at home. It is still a taboo to discuss sex at the family level. This makes children get and act on wrong information, which they pick haphazardly.
- Advocate for formal education of the girl child.
- Empower the most vulnerable groups, such as women and girls.
- Organize HIV screening activities outside health care settings to do away with stigma of hospital-based testing.
- Show love and concern to those who are already sick.

Have you joined #HealthyUg yet? Take our quiz and learn more at yali.state.gov/health.


Dr. Talla is studying at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2014 as a Humphrey Fellow, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. As a Humphrey Fellow, Dr. Talla is focused on health policy improvement and coordination, monitoring and evaluation of health programs, and implementation of effective public health programs, specifically as they relate to HIV/AIDS.

Building skills in technology

“By building skills in technology creation, people can develop innovative solutions to community

and economic problems and empower themselves to explore their full potential.”

- Regina Agyare

A Tech Needs Girls volunteer conducts a  lesson in writing computer code with girls in Accra. Credit: R. Agyare

Software developer Regina Agyare believes Information Technology (IT) can drive significant social change. A 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow, Agyare helped launch the U.N.-related project Tech Needs Girls in Ghana. Her own company, Soronko Solutions, uses information technology to develop solutions allowing clients to reach their potential.

YALI Network Question: How does IT promote human potential?

Agyare: Technology is a tool and an enabler to help people take an idea or solution from inception to execution. IT can help your idea leapfrog infrastructure gaps and impact a large number of people. By building skills in technology creation, people can develop innovative solutions to community and economic problems and empower themselves to explore their full potential.

Question: Describe Soronko’s efforts to pursue those goals with girls in Ghana.

Agyare: Ghanaian women and girls are lagging behind in developing IT skills. At Soronko we run a project called Tech Needs Girls, which is a mentorship program where we teach girls between the ages of 6 and 18 years old how to code and create with IT tools. The girls are trained by young female mentors who study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in the university. They use a unique curriculum, which makes coding fun and allows for creativity and problem solving.

Some of the girls in these programs are from slum communities and could be forced into early marriage. By teaching them coding skills, we hope to help them empower themselves economically and continue their education.

Q: Have the newly trained girls been able to move into jobs?

Agyare: Tech Needs Girls alumnae are currently doing internships at the biggest software company in Ghana, called Rancard Solutions.

Q: What has Soronko Solutions accomplished in helping Ghanaian businesses better use technology to expand?

Agyare: At Soronko Solutions, we believe in using technology to help Ghanaian businesses grow and gain visibility. We have built services to help a wide range of clients automate processes to make business operations more efficient, increase turnover and bring their services to the customer’s doorstep.

Q: How does someone begin to work with or for Soronko?

Agyare: It is very accessible to work with Soronko. We are always looking for young individuals who are passionate about using technology to drive small businesses or promote social change. We also offer internships and sponsor clubs in the university where we train young women in STEM fields and prepare them for the job market or starting their own business.

Q: Soronko is working like some corporate and nonprofit hubs in the larger IT community that launch further waves of innovation in the communities surrounding them. How does that work?

Agyare: Innovation hubs are very important because they provide the space, training, skills development and inspiration to unlock the creative potential in our youth. They also allow for collaboration and for individuals with different skills and abilities to integrate their talents to solve community problems and develop themselves.

Q: What can YALI Network members do to start a hub in a community?

Agyare: The first thing would be to get a space to house hub activities. If one does not have access to a space, the next best thing is to create a virtual hub. That's an online community of people where knowledge is shared, innovation is encouraged and interactivity is expected. Hub members can meet regularly in open spaces or use community resources and spaces.

Q: Can their facilities also be meeting and networking spaces?

Agyare: Definitely, hub facilities can be meeting and networking spaces. It is actually important for the ecosystem and the success of hubs that meetings and networking among the members is encouraged.

Q: Are innovation hubs emerging in more places in Africa?

Agyare: Yes, and they are needed to address issues like Africa's huge unemployment problem and to engage young people to become innovative change-makers and problem solvers.

Lukonga Lindunda, a Mandela Washington Fellowship alumus, provided [this interactive map](#) of innovation hubs around Africa. Read more about [Lindunda](#) and [BongoHive](#), the innovation hub he co-founded in Zambia.

[South African Designer Makes Casual, Trendy Clothes with Military Look](#)

"Love what you do. Having a passion for the business can go a long way when overcoming obstacles."

Models wore LEGION fashions at a recent hip-hop 

festival in KwaMakhutha Township, South Africa.

Credit: LEGION Fashions

Fashion is a fickle industry, but a designer in KwaMakhutha Township, South Africa, has created an urban, casual and trendy look that she hopes will become fashion cool for young men.

LEGION fashions is a menswear brand based in Durban, South Africa, owned by designer Nandipha Gaelesiwe, a member of the YALI Network. She is getting the company started as she completes a degree in clothing at the Durban University of Technology.

Could you describe your business to the YALI Network?

Gaelesiwe: LEGION produces men's garments with a military-influenced look, but with a design and fit that set them apart. My motto is "Camouflage is not only for combat." I want to produce designs that show the versatility of camouflage prints from traditional to modern. I also want a brand influenced by my own experience and by the urban hip-hop lifestyle.

What is distinctive about LEGION products?

Gaelesiwe: The styling and cut of LEGION products are distinctive. The camouflage print represents the brand and sets it apart from other products on the market. The garments break away from a traditional loose fit. They have a tailored style that lies smooth against the body while still maintaining ease of movement.

The South African fashion market has very few locally produced and developed urban brands catering towards the hip-hop community. This is a growing sector in South Africa's entertainment industry, but most artists are wearing international brands. LEGION aims to promote a South African brand in the hip-hop community.

How close are you to getting there?

Gaelesiwe: I've been finishing my degree, learning all the things that are going to help me achieve these goals.

LEGION started as a brand in 2013 with my output based on a custom-order for each client, but I plan to scale up the business soon. I need to find a space with greater production capacity, to give room to all the sewing equipment and workspace necessary. I'm also looking for textile companies that will serve as suppliers of fabric and will custom-design prints for me.

You're doing online sales now. Do you plan to open a storefront?

Gaelesiwe: Currently, LEGION is selling through social media sites online and also personal selling methods. Future plans are to open storefronts in Durban and Johannesburg. Both of these cities are hubs to my market and are growing fashion capitals in South Africa.

What obstacles have you faced in your startup, and how have you overcome them?

Gaelesiwwe: I'm still dealing with these obstacles daily. The biggest issue is finding capital to finance the business. I do not have enough resources at the moment. I'm looking at different avenues of finance that might be available through government assistance and programmes for up-and-coming designers.


Marketing the business as a startup is also challenging. But I'm trying to be proactive, targeting local hip-hop artists to wear my clothing so that it can become more recognized. I'm also finding opportunities to showcase LEGION products at events like hip-hop festivals.

What advice do you offer others wanting to start a business?

1. Love what you do. Having a passion for the business can go a long way when overcoming obstacles.
2. Make long-term goals.
3. Believe in yourself and be open to learn something new.

(LEGION Communications Director Nkosinathi Mkhize, also a member of the YALI Network, contributed to this article.)


Lessons for Aspiring Young Entrepreneurs

Photo Courtesy 
Sheena Lindahl

By: Sheena Lindahl, co-founder and CEO of [Empact](#)

Join Sheena Lindahl for a Facebook #YALICHAT starting Tuesday, November 18. You can submit your questions until Thursday, November 20. Post your questions on Facebook or tweet your questions to @YALINetwork and include #YALICHAT. Tuesday-Thursday, November 18-20.

Most entrepreneurs have few resources when they begin. They do not have a lot of money, experience, education or networks but they launch and grow their businesses anyway. I saw this firsthand in September when I met young entrepreneurs in Ghana. The challenges and experiences they described to me were not all the same as those faced by other entrepreneurs. I have learned that it no matter where you live, it is how people react to their challenges that makes all the difference in their success.

Sheena Lindahl with group of young 

entrepreneurs during her visit to the U.S. Embassy in Ghana. Photo courtesy Sheena Lindahl.

These are some tips I shared with aspiring Ghanaians:

Break a big idea into a smaller idea to start. Most people launching their first company do not have the funding or skills to start the next WhatsApp. I met an inspiring young entrepreneur in Tamale, Ghana, who was running a clothing store. He started with a single pair of sneakers — no store, no inventory, no funding — just one lone pair of sneakers. He sold those and used his profit to buy two more pairs. Then he branched out and included other products. He kept reinvesting his profits until he had enough to fund inventory, space and people to work for him. Starting small is often far less risky and a more certain path to success than waiting for an investor.

Tomorrow will not be a better day to start. Many entrepreneurs wait for what they think are perfect conditions to start their businesses. Very rarely will the perfect time arrive. Instead, entrepreneurs get their businesses off the ground by taking action today to move forward. By taking even small actions they take control and make their own favorable conditions.

Identify your assets and start from there. Focus on what you do have and not what you don't. We worry about our assets, our ideas or what the critics might say. You cannot control someone else's actions or thoughts. You cannot control what challenges you're starting with.


Focus your efforts on what you can control. Entrepreneurs focus on what they can control. If you don't have money to launch, maybe you have a network of friends and family who will be your first customers. You may have an uncle who understands the process of exporting or a financially savvy aunt who can help you think through your plan. Your own skill set — whether it includes photography or carpentry — will also benefit your business. Networks and skills are assets as valuable as investment dollars. By focusing on what you do have and where you have control, you have all you need to take your first steps.

Sheena is president and co-founder of Empact, an organization that has held events bringing top young entrepreneurs to college campuses, including the [Empact Showcase](#), a celebration of young entrepreneurs with recognition events held at the White House, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the United Nations.

The views and opinions expressed here belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the YALI Network or the U.S. government.

Girl Power and Protection, Now and Forever

Even as a child in Zimbabwe, Nyaradzo Mashayamombe tried to defend and protect abused orphans. In secondary school, she saw boys bullying and mistreating girls and began to dream of a world where things could be different.

Nyaradzo Mashayamombe visits schools  regularly to talk to schoolchildren about their role in preventing violence. (Photo Credit: N. Mashayamombe)

Describing herself as a born activist, Mashayamombe foresaw a time when boys would respect girls as much as themselves. Mashayamombe, a member of the YALI Network, also set her sights on bringing girls greater opportunities for education and achievement.


Mashayamombe celebrates the International Day of the Girl on October 11 with the knowledge that she has shared that dream with about 38,000 people across Zimbabwe through the organization she began in 2010, [Tag a Life International \(TaLI\)](#).

With financial support through U.S. Embassy Harare, the U.S. President's Plan for Emergency AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and Hivos, a Netherlands-based international development organization, Mashayamombe has started TaLI clubs in 76 schools. These chapters and their supporters work to reduce gender-based violence and to address the social circumstances that give rise to such violence. Reducing the occurrence of HIV infection among abused girls is another important objective.

The U.S. Embassy projects that its financial support for TaLI will allow the organization to reach 300 more schools with lessons of respect and opportunity over the next two years.

Even while TaLI supporters envision a time in Zimbabwe when children are never tormented and girls never abused, the organization works to provide resources to children who have already been victimized. TaLI provides medical attention, psychosocial counseling and other support services to abused children. The organization also works with law enforcement to help bring cases of abuse to justice.

"We want to see the government of Zimbabwe committing more resources to the issue of child protection," Mashayamombe said in a statement released in recognition of the Day of the Girl. "We also want to see well-resourced justice delivery system and a swift response to cases of abuse."

South African schoolgirls play a ball  game. Ensuring

that girls get educational opportunities will improve their entire future.

Reducing gender-based violence and promoting greater empowerment of girls and women is a cause with broad support across the YALI Network. Another network member wrote us about her work at [Sonke Gender Justice](#). This South Africa-based NGO works across Africa to strengthen government, civil society and citizen capacity to promote gender equality, prevent domestic and sexual violence, and reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS.

Itumeleng Komanyane writes that Sonke Gender Justice envisions a world in which men, women and children can enjoy equitable, healthy and happy relationships that contribute to the development of just and democratic societies.

Creating greater empowerment and opportunity for all is a key value of the Mandela Washington Fellowship program. If you are a community leader involved with these important issues — like Mashayamombe and Komanyane — think about applying to become a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow. The application is open until November 5, 2014, so apply soon. Learn more [here](#).

To Achieve Equality, First Lady Wants to 'Shake Things Up'

Africa's future lies with women who run businesses, girls who attend university and "leaders like you," U.S. first lady Michelle Obama told young Africans attending the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders Summit in Washington.

"Leadership is about creating new traditions that honor the dignity and humanity of every individual. Leadership is about empowering all of our people — men, women, boys and girls — to fulfill every last bit of their God-given potential," she said to the gathering of Africa's future leaders.

"When we commit to that kind of leadership across the globe, that is when we truly start making progress on girls' education. Because that's when families in small villages around the world will demand equal opportunities for their daughters. ... That's when countries will willingly and generously invest in sending their girls to school," she stated.

The first lady noted that girls who are educated earn higher wages, are more likely to stand up to discrimination and abuse, and have healthier children who are more likely to attend school themselves.

She recalled that while neither of her parents had gone to university, "they had the courage and foresight to push me to get the best education I could."

“That’s what should drive us all — the hope of raising the next generation to be stronger, smarter and bolder than our generation. ... So many of you are already doing that.”

Photo credit: AP Images



The first lady called on the men at the summit and others in the YALI Network to tell all the men they know “that a truly strong, powerful man isn’t threatened by a strong, powerful woman. Instead, he is challenged by her, he is inspired by her, he is pleased to relate to her as an equal.” She implored them “to keep modeling that behavior yourselves by promoting women in your companies, passing laws to empower women in your countries, and holding the same ambitious dreams for your daughters as you do for your sons.”

She called on women at the summit and in YALI — some of whom may have disappointed their families by postponing marriage in order to get an education — to help others to do the same.

Obama told the group that when they face obstacles and resistance in their work goals to remember the words of the man for whom their fellowship is now named — the late South African leader Nelson Mandela:

“It always seems impossible until it is done.”

[The Women’s Luncheon at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit](#)

What is the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit?

It’s the largest engagement a U.S. president has ever had with African leaders and governments. The [U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit](#) will bring together 50 heads of state, along with a range of U.S. and African civil society and business leaders, to discuss the future of Africa.

What issues will the Summit address?

The summit leader sessions will focus on topics such as trade and investment, peace and regional stability, and good governance. The signature events will address issues such as civil society, women’s empowerment, global health, resilience and food security, and wildlife trafficking.

What will happen at the women’s empowerment event?

During the *Investing in Women for Peace and Prosperity* signature event, [U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power](#) will host a panel discussion that will emphasize the importance of investing in women for peace and prosperity; highlight African governments’ effort to promote gender equality; and reaffirm African and U.S. commitments to advancing gender equality.

Why is this issue important to young African leaders?

African women's leadership and meaningful participation across sectors and generations are central to sustainable development in Africa. Women's participation — in government, the economy, and society — accelerates economic growth, improves health and education, advances democratic governance and fosters peace and security.

When women have the same opportunities and access to resources as do men, the benefits extend beyond women themselves. As women work to strengthen their families and communities, they foster the education and health of the next generation, hasten economic growth and strengthen public and private institutions.

And when women succeed, nations succeed. In countries where women are empowered to participate and to lead, society is safer, more secure and more prosperous. That's because women's participation in and leadership of public and private institutions make these institutions more representative and more effective.

The United States is committed to supporting the efforts of its African partners and young African leaders to expand women's and girls' access to health care, education, clean water and proper nutrition; and to promote women's full participation in society.

Photo credit: MCC

What was the outcome of the Investing in Women, Peace and Prosperity Signature Event at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit?

Jill Biden, wife of U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, opened the "Investing in Women for Peace and Prosperity" signature event at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, where the United States committed new assistance to [advance women's empowerment](#) in Africa. The support will bolster women's participation in peace building and in parliamentary campaigns, assist in the development or implementation of National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security, and help women entrepreneurs to launch or expand businesses.

The United States will provide technical support to strengthen African Union and national-level efforts to address barriers to the equal participation of women in the agricultural sector. Through [wPOWER](#) and working with the [Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves](#), it will provide grants to organizations that promote the role of women entrepreneurs in selling clean technologies and that scale-up programs to educate adolescent girls on clean-energy technologies. The United States also will provide increased assistance to the Inter-Parliamentary Union to build the capacity of African parliaments working to advance gender equality and to support parliamentary campaigns on specific gender-equality issues.
